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Written statement* submitted by the Society for Threatened Peoples, a non-governmental organization in special consultative status

The Secretary-General has received the following written statement which is circulated in accordance with Economic and Social Council resolution 1996/31.

[26 May 2014]

* This written statement is issued, unedited, in the language(s) received from the submitting non-governmental organization(s).

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Witchcraft Killings in Africa

The lives of elderly people in Kenya and many other African countries are increasingly threatened since the remarkable upsurge in witchcraft killings. Among the Giriama ethnic group, living South of Mombasa at the Kenyan coast, there has been a significant increase in killings since the 1980s. Today, every month some 90 elders of the Kiriama people get killed after having been accused of being a witch. The case of the Kiriama is only one example for a phenomenon which is widespread in many African states.

Every state has an obligation to protect its citizens from harm and threats to their life. Witchcraft killings are not a new phenomenon, but they have increased massively since colonial times. Nowadays, the escalation of witchcraft killings may change the demography of many ethnic groups and lead to the extinction of elderly people among many impoverished ethnic groups in Kenya, Tanzania, Nigeria, Cameroon and Zambia. There is an urgent need for states to act to prevent that an entire generation and their knowledge of traditions and culture might disappear in a brutal wave of killings. Furthermore, the state of Kenya has an obligation to act to ensure that elderly people are living without constant fear of being murdered only due to their advanced age.

The national, regional and local authorities in Kenya have failed to provide adequate protection for elderly people despite repeated warnings and appeals by local NGOs highlighting the dramatic plight of elderly people. Impunity prevails regarding most crimes committed in the context of witchcraft killings because very often family members are involved in the killings, being reluctant to cooperate with the police. Sometimes the police doesn't want to become involved in family matters and abandons the criminal investigation at a preliminary stage. In many cases the police is unaware of the criminal intent of actions by family members who are presenting the death of the elder as an accident. In these cases the police even does not open a formal criminal investigation. Knowing the background and the extent of witchcraft killings the Kenyan authorities should do more to end impunity, otherwise they are inciting more violence against elderly people. To effectively solve witchcraft disputes it should be allowed to refer the case to the traditional justice system.

Despite the desperate need for more effective criminal investigations state authorities should launch more awareness campaigns to educate the people on the difference between healers, diviners and witches and promote more respect for elderly people.

There are many factors leading to the upsurge in killings of elderly people as so called witches: business rivalries, conflicts between generations, inheritance conflicts, lacking respect of elderly people. But impoverishment in rural areas is one of the leading forces behind this wave of killings. Therefore the state should dedicate more programs to fight poverty. Good governance on all administration levels would encourage the respect for the law by all citizens.

Many of these programs only will take effect after years. In the meantime, the government of Kenya should concentrate to cooperate with local NGOs in building up rescue centers for elderly people. These rescue centers should be open to all elderly people not feeling safe at home and should be guarded by police. State authorities should do their utmost that these centers will be self-sufficient, but the inhabitants should be able to maintain a good relationship with their families and with people living outside of these centers.
The anti-witchcraft law of Kenya should be repealed or amended urgently because this law is inciting more violence instead of preventing new killings. It lacks respect to traditional systems of conflict resolution which might be more effective than trying to launch official criminal investigations.

Society for Threatened Peoples calls on the UN Human Rights Council to urge the Government of Kenya to:

- Ensure an effective protection of elderly people to save them from witchcraft killings;
- Create self-reliable rescue centers for elderly people;
- Launch awareness campaigns on the difference between traditional healers, diviners and witches;
- Repeal or amend the anti-witchcraft law;
- End impunity for witchcraft killings;
- Promote more programs to fight poverty, especially in rural areas.